





SOME  
REMARKS ON DROPSY,

WITH A  
NARRATIVE

OF THE  
LAST ILLNESS OF H. R. H. THE DUKE OF YORK,

READ AT THE  
ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS, MAY 25, 1835.

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## REMARKS ON DROPSY,

&c.

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DROPSY, as is well known, is generally a symptom only of another distemper, and that, most usually a fatal one ; for instance, if persons have laboured for any length of time under complaints of the lungs or heart, and the legs begin to swell, it may safely be inferred that there is some deep-seated mischief within the chest, upon which the dropsical swellings depend : these, it is found, sooner or later become universal, and have a mortal termination. However, there are dropsical swellings which are not so dangerous : in females, for example, an *ovary* often becomes the seat of dropsy ; and the disease has been known to con-

tinue for ten years or more, with little other annoyance than that which resulted from the bulk and weight of the swelling. Pathologists see at once that this is to be attributed to the comparative unimportance of this *viscus* to the functions of life.

Dropsy, again, may depend upon temporary causes, such as an inflammatory state of the system, or mere debility; and cases of this nature are of course more curable than those which depend upon organic disease of either the thoracic, abdominal, or other viscera.

It is not, however, my intention to enter upon the various causes of dropsy, but to relate the particulars of a case not more remarkable for the rank and station of the subject of it, than for some of the circumstances with which it was attended.

The characteristic features of a fatal dropsy were but too well illustrated in the

malady which terminated the life of the late Duke of York.

So early as the 9th of June, 1826, the first indications of serious indisposition were observed; but for some time before that period, a difficulty in ascending a flight of stairs, or in assuming a recumbent posture in bed, was remarked: so much, indeed, was the difficulty of breathing aggravated by lying down in bed, that he passed his nights frequently in an arm-chair. On the Duke's return from Ascot races, the signs of the hydropic disposition became decided, in a diminished secretion of urine, the presence of thirst, and œdema of the feet and ankles. Remedies, consisting chiefly of blue pill and squills, were prescribed. His Royal Highness removed from his town residence to Brompton, and on the 14th August went to Brighton, for the benefit of further change of air. Sir Henry Hallford and myself accompanied

him. It was here that the œdema of the lower extremities increasing, the first symptom exhibited itself which induced his medical attendants to speak with distrust and alarm of the final issue of the complaint. From the extremely distended skin, an oozing of serous fluid took place, which, though trifling in appearance to a casual observer, yet could not be seen without anxiety by those who are aware how prone a limb, under such circumstances, is to put on a gangrenous state ; as the vital powers gradually yield, and the constitution is reduced to a feeble condition. It was at this time that a most difficult question arose, and it is by the kindness of the President that I am permitted to mention the facts attending this dilemma, out of which, I can confidently assert, his firmness and sagacity alone extricated us. Early in the complaint, a most confidential friend of his Royal Highness had, in consequence of the urgent importunity of his royal master,



promised to announce to him the first approach of danger, so that he might not be taken by surprise on such an occasion. The prognosis which we were now obliged to form of the ultimate event of the case, was, in consequence of the symptoms above alluded to, become much more unfavourable ; but was this to be told to the patient, so as to deprive him and his medical attendants of the cheerful influence and salutary assistance of hope and confidence ? The lesson read on this occasion is important to all medical men ; for similar circumstances must again occur, and the general principle laid down by Sir Henry Hallford will be found in the letter which he wrote at that time, with reference to the propriety of the disclosure.

“ There are some maladies in which we find the hopes of our patient predominate to so unreasonable a degree, as to render it expedient on many accounts to repress

these hopes ; but if we cannot keep up and maintain the confidence of a sick man under a visitation of the Duke's particular disease, his despondency destroys him prematurely, and all the efforts of our art are puny, inadequate, useless. I must entreat you, therefore, to refer his Royal Highness to *me* for any explanation of his difficulties ; this is *my* especial province ; and whatever you may feel of apprehension, I entreat you to hide it all within your own bosom, and to parry every form of solicitation, every appeal to your integrity, every demand upon your attachment, by an absolute reference to *my* judgment, to *my* affectionate interest in his Royal Highness's comfort and recovery, and to *my* duty. I shall be ready with my answer whenever his Royal Highness may be pleased to appeal to me ; but in the peculiar circumstances of this case, it will be well if the best discretion be equal to all the niceties which this formidable distemper, and the character

of the Duke's mind, throw around the management of it."

On a subsequent occasion, in reference to the same subject, the President used the following expressions, in reply to the same correspondent :—

" I would not have you understand it to be my meaning, that the time would never arrive when his Royal Highness should know that I expect a fatal issue of his symptoms. God forbid that either he, or any human being, should leave this world without being apprised that their last hours were approaching, and that they should prepare themselves for the change they were about to undergo. But I thought the struggle was making at this instant between the strength of the disease and the power of the constitution, and I felt sure that this battle must be fought to a great disadvantage if the mind were depressed. I assure you, that, in the same spirit in which

you made your promise to the Duke, I make mine now to you, that when I lose all further hopes of administering the resources of our art to him with good effect, I will not only consent to your making the communication, but I will invite you to make it.”

But to return to the narrative: the disease continued to make progress, the dropsical swellings to increase, and there was evident fluctuation of water in the abdomen,—in other words, a true *ascites* was now formed; and, after mature deliberation, it was resolved to endeavour to relieve the difficulty of breathing, and to lessen the pressure from above upon the extremities.

In the afternoon of September 3, the operation of tapping was performed, on which occasion about three gallons of fluid were let out. His Royal Highness bore the operation with the same resolution and

quiet composure which had marked his conduct during every stage of his illness; and though naturally a little exhausted, was found afterwards by his intimate friends cheerful, and quite free from any nervous agitation. For some days he remained very weak, the left leg continuing in a state that occasioned serious uneasiness; nor, indeed, was the appearance of the other much more satisfactory.

In about a fortnight, however, he gained strength, the appetite and sleep improved, and on the 19th September he was enabled to resume his daily airings in a carriage, which exercise was continued till the 16th October. During the greater part of this interval, the following was the form of medicine prescribed:—

R Decocti Spartii, 3x; Infusi Digitalis, 3ij. ; Spt. Juniperi Comp. 3ij. ; Tinct. Rhei, 3j. Misce fiat haustus ter in die sumendus.

At this critical period his Royal High-



ness rallied considerably, and the circumstances of his general health appeared to be much improving. As that variety of dropsy called *hydrothorax*, in which the cavity of the chest is the seat of the disease, is considered to be the one in which the digitalis is most serviceable, the fox-glove had been ordered ; and the broom (*planta genista*)\* with which it was combined agreed so well with our patient, that it was impossible to avoid remarking, that it seemed as if the ancient cognizance of the Plantagenets was destined to be the most auspicious remedy administered to a Prince of the House of York.

It happened that at this time I had a patient under my care, in the Middlesex Hospital, labouring under *ascites* ; and her abdomen became, at length, so distended,

\* Fulk, Earl of Anjou, grandfather of Henry II., bore the broom branch in his penitential pilgrimage to the Holy Land ; hence the name of Plantagenet, from *Planta genista*, the Latin name of this shrub, which was also the cognizance of Henry II. and Richard II.

that, after the trial of various diuretic remedies without much benefit, the operation of tapping seemed to promise the only mode of relief; and in a few days it had been determined that it should be performed. To leave, however, no means unemployed, I ordered the digitalis, combined with the broom, in the exact formula mentioned above, and in a very short time the remedies acted in so decided a manner that the whole of the fluid was carried off, and the operation of *paracentesis* rendered unnecessary by the powerful action of the kidneys themselves. This circumstance, occurring at this very moment, increased my confidence.

These hopes proved, however, unfortunately delusive: the condition of the legs became worse, the constitutional powers gave way, the appetite and sleep began to fail, and, during the whole month of November, the situation of the royal

sufferer was becoming daily more critical : in short he was visibly losing strength and substance. The increased alarm and anxiety felt by his medical attendants were now imparted to him, and he received the communication with pious resignation—exclaiming, “God’s will be done ; I am resigned !”

Towards the end of December, the weakness increasing, attacks of faintness came on ; announcing the nearer approach of danger. On the 20th of that month, his Royal Highness took the sacrament, for the second time, and during the whole of the solemn ceremony, nothing could exceed his attention and calm devotion. From this time till the hour of his death, the symptoms of difficulty of breathing and disposition to *syncope* (during the attacks of which neither the pulse nor the respiration were perceptible for nearly a minute) became more urgent. These fits of fainting offered very striking and appalling examples of the



simultaneous suspension of the two great vital functions—viz. respiration and circulation; and showed how life is again gradually restored, after its apparent extinction. This is a phenomenon seen occasionally in those persons who, after long immersion in water, are restored to animation, provided they have fainted previously to the act of drowning. During the night of the 4th January, 1827, so serious an attack of this nature came on that it was thought all was over; but such was his tenacity of life and the power of his constitution, that he rallied, and in the morning of the 5th took some nourishment. About twelve o'clock, though unable to speak, yet, by looking at a clock which stood in the room, and then at his legs, and by other signs sufficiently intelligible, he gave his medical attendants to understand that he wished the daily dressings to be gone through. This wish, however useless now, was immediately complied with, and it

evidently gave a satisfaction which, alas ! could not be expressed. The pulse became more feeble, the attacks of faintness more frequent, and at twenty minutes past nine in the evening he died.

The disease, of which the leading features have been here enumerated, may be considered as a case of *hydrothorax*, in which it is probable that the valves of the great vessels of the heart were rendered unfit to discharge their office, by organic lesion. The shortness and oppression of breathing which accompanied the commencement of the complaint—the subsequent œdematous state of the legs, together with the impaired function of the kidneys—were all symptoms of this morbid condition. It is a point now well established in pathology, that diseases of the heart, obstructing the passage of the blood in the venous system, occasion general effusion, as well into the cellular tissue as into the cavities of the

body. The obliteration of particular veins, from accidental pressure, is the obvious source of very obstinate anasarca ; but when the accumulation of fluid has been so general as it was in the case of his Royal Highness, and the dyspnœa from the beginning so prominent a symptom, it may reasonably be conjectured that the disease, in all its subsequent modifications, had a higher origin, and was to be attributed to some structural derangement of the heart itself.

Thus perished a most amiable and illustrious Prince, to whom a grateful country must ever acknowledge its lasting obligations. He had been at the head of the army for upwards of thirty years ; his constant aim had been to improve its condition and maintain its energies, in their greatest efficiency. The merit of having first raised the character of the British service, belongs exclusively to the Duke of York. Of the

resolution with which he bore the acute sufferings and protracted confinement of a painful disease, I am myself a witness ; and of the pious resignation with which he bowed to the decision of an all-wise Providence, there is ample testimony. Nor did his Royal Highness's bodily suffering, nor the contemplation of his critical state, diminish in any degree the interest which he had ever taken in public affairs, and in the welfare and prosperity of his country.



